

Giving the World a Face: The Humanizing of Global Education

Jennifer D. Klein

“Principles, once internalized, lead to something. They prompt activity, impel motion, direct choices. A principled person always has a place to stand, knows where he or she is coming from and likely to end up. Principles always lead the person who possesses them somewhere, for some purpose, to do something, or choose not to. Neither principles nor values lead anywhere if they remain abstract, embalmed in print, or are not internalized by human persons. If they are to be taught, the principles need a human face; they must be conveyed in words and images that move the heart.”

—William J. Byron

The scariest moment I’ve ever faced as a global educator happened during my first live video conference with the West Bank. I was presenting for the Research Journalism Initiative, an educational project connecting Palestinian and American youth, at the annual conference of the International Studies Schools Association. In front of an audience of 40+ educators and school heads from across the country, a professor in the West Bank referred to the Israelis as “terrorists.” I remember my stomach dropping to my feet, remember recognizing both shock and disappointment in faces around the room—shock to hear something so hateful in what was meant to be an educational exchange, disappointment that this professor was responding to hate with more hate, was choosing to dehumanize his enemy rather than understand him.

This experience explains why so many educators shy away from teaching the hard topics of race and ethnicity, religion and identity, shy away from connecting their students with real humans and their very real, very

volatile responses to life in regions of conflict and distress. But I insist that these are teachable moments. I told the ISSA audience this Palestinian professor’s story: shot by the Israeli military three times and imprisoned twice in his teens, tortured brutally in prison, his mother killed in front of him... Whether I agree with his word choice or not, I have to be able to see this man as a human being, a man who uses the words he does because his experience has genuinely led him here. And if I can honor his perspective, then I can teach my students to do it too, to consistently use dialogue to deconstruct and understand bias rather than simply rejecting views that contradict their own.

It is possible to humanize education and teach conflict in a way that unearths the real stories, the human stories, for students. For me, the goal is developing not just a willingness to listen but a curiosity about others, so that students learn to seek out people’s most important stories. Humanizing global education requires overcoming our own fears as adults—of the hard questions, of the



parent phone calls, of the very real pain of exposing kids to the world and its realities in all their grit and glory. But if we can’t learn to confront our own fears about conflict and dialogue, if we can’t lean into our discomfort and learn from it, then how can we ever expect to create leaders who know how to navigate and even resolve the most complex global challenges? Why would any of us want the next generation to have as much difficulty discussing identity and conflict as we do?

Raised in early models of experiential education, I always thrived on moments of connection when differences were recognized comfortably and talked about openly, moments in which people overcame their prejudices to see someone else as a human being. As an educator, I find that students are hungry for teachers who model transparency and honesty, who struggle alongside their students and talk about the hard stuff openly. Interestingly enough, it is easier for students to connect with the experience of young people on the other side

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of the globe than to ask the same hard questions of peers from different cultural origins sitting beside them in class, so global education teaches them to face that challenge in a less threatening way. Once students learn to connect deeply and authentically with their counterparts abroad, it becomes increasingly possible to do the same at home, giving teachers a chance to create more vibrant, constructive dialogue about race, ethnicity, religion and other facets of identity (and sources of conflict) within the school community as well. Teachers decide whether kids learn to talk about hard topics or avoid them, whether they become comfortable with dialogue, even in the face of discord. It may be the hardest work we do as teachers, but I believe it is the most important.

A humanizing approach requires a shift of academic thinking, however, particularly on the part of high school and college teachers. While our content remains important, our students are facing an increasingly interconnected world where the interpersonal and cross-cultural skills we help them develop are more important than their book knowledge and place in the ivory tower. A humanizing approach requires valuing primary sources, means asking the right questions so that students explore more than debate given perspectives. Too often, education becomes an argument over facts rather than the exploration of real people's lives—yet the individual stories are what our students will remember 20 years from now. These are no longer the “soft skills” global education was relegated to in the past; the capacity to work across cultural and geographical borders is increasingly vital to a myriad of corporations and professions, and this is pushing global curriculum into the mainstream in U.S. schools.

The first step for any school hoping to globalize school culture is to offer international trips which allow students to connect deeply with another community. The best service learning models immerse students in foreign communities through home stays and service work, rather than taking the more traditional “tour bus” approach to travel. For example, World Leadership School (WLS) only works with schools interested in fostering long-term partnerships with communities in the developing world. WLS students explore their own leadership skills but also recognize what makes good leadership in the context of the destination community. By looking closely at local leaders and the issues they confront in a given world culture, students learn to see both leadership and development not as abstract concepts but as human ones. For students who can afford it, travel is a vital part of any global education program, and there is no replacement for an immersive on-the-ground experience.

However, the expectation that every teen will have the opportunity to travel is both economically unrealistic and environmentally irresponsible, so physical travel should only be part of any school's broader global programming. The second step is to train teachers in distance learning tools, e-technologies which offer increasingly accessible avenues for transformative global educational experiences inside the school house. Under the slogan of “Inspire, Inform, Involve,” the platforms of TakingITGlobal's educational branch, TIGed, currently help 4,328 teachers in 115 countries to shape global partnerships and collaborations through virtual classrooms. Additionally, TIG's public forums allow students to seek out their own connections and collaborations with other young people in the world,

and the galleries, magazines and blogs allow students a platform for public expression in 12 main languages (English, Spanish, French, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Russian, Romanian, Swedish, Turkish, Chinese, and Arabic), although the platform supports any characters and contains content in 46 other world languages. Designed as social networking for social good, TIG appeals to students' need to be creative and interactive, and its platforms provide rich learning environments which young people find just as addictive as Facebook.

The third and most vital step in global education is to develop substantive, ongoing partnerships between students in the U.S. and students abroad, so that technology becomes a means for a deeper purpose, a means for substantive study, action and collaborative solution building. The more students learn to navigate discomfort and see the people in their textbooks as real human beings, the more they are naturally drawn to respond to those humans' needs. This urge is born naturally out of recognition of the “other,” whoever that other might be, and it becomes the job of good teachers to guide students toward constructive action in the face of the overwhelming complexities behind global poverty and conflict. Giving the world a real, human face will be among the most transformative experiences students have, and teachers help decide whether it leaves young people depressed and paralyzed or motivated and constructive.

Building on several years of experience fostering empathic relationships between young Palestinians in the West Bank and their counterparts in the United States through multi-media exchange and live videoconferencing, the Research Journalism Initiative (RJI) is developing practical avenues

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for students to turn their passions into action. RJI's new *Gateways to Collaborative Advocacy* program provides comprehensive training for youth in the field of human rights and social justice advocacy, featuring collaborative work among students in the United States, Canada, Israel and the West Bank through digital videoconferencing and other e-technologies, and empowering students to develop innovative tools to cooperatively address the most pressing geo-political challenges in the world.

Through personalized instruction and online collaboration, students learn to identify pressing issues, engage their international counterparts in meaningful cross-cultural dialogue, articulate the change they wish to create in the world, forge meaningful connections with decision-makers, communicate their visions of change, and evaluate the impact of their work. After the training course, students work together to practice real-world advocacy in a wide range of decision-making forums, including meetings of corporate shareholders, university student unions, trade unions, government at the state and federal levels, and national faith-based initiatives. Students not only learn advocacy skills, but through strategic partnerships and targeted action they pass

through key gateways into the public sphere and leverage their contributions to the global policy discourse.

I'm amused when people call youth the next generation of leaders—young people are already creating significant change around the world. Organizations like WLS, TIG and RJI recognize that youth are already a vibrant, constructive force, a potentially staggering source of positive change—the question is only how to harness and direct those urges, so that young people feel empowered to live in constructive partnership with the world. In my opinion, teaching tolerance and an observational, “tour bus” approach to global studies is setting the bar too low. If teachers can humanize the hard topics and struggle with the complexities alongside our students, we can build the generation we so desperately need, a generation of thinkers who see their destiny as connected to that of every other human on the planet.

Jennifer D. Klein taught high school and college English for 19 years, and is now conducting professional development trainings for teachers in global education and the use of e-technologies and creativity to humanize the study of conflict. She also gives student workshops on cultural pluralism which use the creative arts, particularly photography and poetry, as a means to enter other people's experiences. Jennifer started PRINCIPLED Learning Strategies in 2010 (www.principledlearning.org) to support schools in the development of global educational programming and enrichment across all disciplines in the K-12 curriculum. Jennifer can be reached at jennifer@principledlearning.org.